

Montebello Renewal on schedule despite rain



North West Island, Montebellos. Left to right: Martin Clarke, Narragin District; Jill Pryde, WATSCU; Brent Johnson, SID, Woodvale; Matt Dowling, Wildlife Branch; Ian Gale, Perth District; Richard Fairman, SID Dwellingup. Photo by Jill Pryde



Arriving at Hermite Island are, left to right, Brent Johnson, Jill Pryde, Martin Clarke, Andrew Burbidge, Jane McRae (SID Woodvale), Howard Robinson (Narragin District). In front, Tony Scolari (pilot) and Diana Papenfus (WA Herbarium). Photo Jill Pryde

"MONTEBELLO Renewal", a 'Western Shield' project, is now well under way and the first four weeks' work was completed on schedule despite copious quantities of unseasonable rain.

The Montebello Islands have suffered considerable abuse by humans. Feral cats and black rats were introduced about 100 years ago, probably from shipwrecks or careening pearling vessels. Their introduction caused the local extinction of at least four native animals — the spectacled hare-wallaby (*Lagorchestes conspicillatus*), golden bandicoot (*Isodon atlas*), black-and-white fairywren (*Malurus leucopterus leucopterus*) and spinifex-bird (*Eremiornis carteri*).

Atomic tests

Then, in the 1950s, the islands were used by the British as a site for testing atomic weapons. During Operation Hurricane, in 1952, a nuclear device was exploded below the waterline in a Royal Navy frigate, HMS *Plym*, off Main Beach at Trimouille Island. Two further weapons were exploded on 30-metre towers in 1956, one at Gladstone Point on Trimouille Island, and another near Burgundy Bay on Alpha Island.

This series of tests was code-named Operation Mosaic, during which the islands were occupied by military forces, and many

tonnes of equipment were left lying around to rust when the nuclear weapons testing program shifted to Maralinga in South Australia.

Rat and cats to go

Montebello Renewal is designed to rid the Montebello Islands Conservation Park of feral rats and cats. The project is being conducted jointly by the CALM Nature Conservation Division's WA Threatened Species and Communities Unit (WATSCU) and CALM's Pilbara Region.

Phase I, the rat eradication, began on May 29, when Director of WATSCU Andrew Burbidge, Steve Grenfell, (Engineering Branch) Geoff Kregor, (Pilbara Region, Millstream National Park) and volunteers Peter Keppell (Mundaring District) and Bill Morrow (ACI Plastics Packaging) left Dampier by charter boat for Hermite Island.

Planning for *Montebello Renewal* had been under way for some time. During 1993 and 1994, biological surveys of the islands identified native species that might be affected by rat and cat baiting programs.

Native species immune

During August 1995, one island was baited to test the bait stations and baiting methods developed for the project. The bait station developed is designed to prevent native birds

eating the bait.

The project is partly funded by the Commonwealth Government, which allocated some management funds to the State when the islands were returned to Western Australian control in 1992.

Additional funds have come from CALM 'Western Shield' sources. However, the project could not have proceeded without sponsorship, and a feature of *Montebello Renewal* has been the support provided by industry groups and volunteers.

The major sponsor, West Australian Petroleum Pty Ltd (WAPET) provided transport of equipment from Perth to Hermite Island and return, and has also donated seats for CALM staff and volunteers on its Ansett jet charters between Perth and Barrow Island.

Apache Energy, which operates oil and gas fields near the Montebellos, transported CALM staff to and from Karratha and also provided some helicopter support and fresh food to keep the teams working.

ACI Plastics Packaging donated 13,800 plastic bottles to be used as bait stations for the rat eradication program.

ICI Crop Care provided the rodent poison Talon® G at a discount price and Selleys Chemical Company donated some of the 'All Clear', an adhesive needed to stick bait stations to rock.

The WAPET-chartered barge *Karinya II* arrived at CALM's Hurricane Hill Hut on Hermite Island on Monday June 3, and unloaded the large quantities of fuel, food, bait stations and other equipment required for the project.

As well as organising these stores and other gear, the advance party had to repair the building, which had been damaged during Cyclone Olivia, and set up a generator and reverse osmosis plant to ensure a regular supply of fresh water.

Staff volunteers

Another feature of *Montebello Renewal* is that most of the 25 or so volunteers who are working in the field are CALM staff who have donated part of their annual leave to help with the project.

Volunteers who worked at the islands up to 10 July were Peter Keppell and Ian Gale (Mundaring District), Diana Papenfus (Science and Information Division, WA Herbarium), Jane McRae (SID, Woodvale), Richard Fairman (SID, Dwellingup), Jill Pryde (WATSCU), Martin Clarke and Howard Robinson (Narragin District), Michelle Widmer (CALM/fire, Nannup), Kevin Morrison (Wildlife Protection, Como), Bob Rickman (Busselton District) and Caroline Brocx (Mornington District).

CALM staff leading the

project had nothing but praise for the volunteers, who all worked hard under often trying conditions and remained cheerful despite being zapped by sandflies! Without the contribution of the volunteers, the project would not have been possible.

CALM staff who have participated as leaders include Andrew Burbidge, Brent Johnson (SID, Woodvale), John Blyth, (WATSCU) and Fran Stanley and Peter Kendrick (Pilbara Region).

Don Noble (Wildlife Protection) navigated *Pseudorca II* to the Montebellos, where it is being used to transport workers and equipment between the base on Hermite Island and the areas being baited.

Trainee wildlife officers Matt Dowling and Ben Tannock worked as part of their training in wildlife management.

Rat baiting was programmed to begin on June 11, the day after the first group of volunteers arrived from Perth. But on the evening of June 10, a storm struck the hut with 70-kilometre winds and driving rain, damaging one tent and wetting the contents of the four others.

It also turned cardboard boxes containing about 10,000 plastic bottles into a soggy mess. So the first day was spent screwing lids onto bottles and tying bottles on to strings of 40.

Unfortunately the rain continued on and off through much

of June. It was so heavy and persistent on one day that the crew coming from Perth were marooned on Barrow Island for a night. In all, about 100 mm of rain fell on the islands during June.

Notwithstanding the rain, all the teams worked hard to lay bait stations on a 50-metre grid over all the more remote islands during the first four weeks of the operation, while a chartered helicopter was present to provide transport.

During this time, equipment dumps were placed on most of the 20 larger islands which are being gridded with bait stations, while the 80 or so small islands and rocks were baited from the helicopter.

Bait moulding in rain

The rain also meant that much of the rat bait laid during June became mouldy and unpalatable, and had to be replaced.

Fortunately, by July 7, the operation was back on schedule, and baiting of the 1,020-hectare Hermite Island—the largest island in the group—began on July 9.

Montebello Renewal is scheduled to continue until the end of August 1996, by which time we hope that the whole chain of islands will be free of rats!

Phase II of *Montebello Renewal*, the cat control project, will begin in August, immediately following the rat eradication project.



South East Island, Montebellos. Photo by Jill Pryde



Aerial view of Montebello Islands. Photo by Jill Pryde

